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Reconciling Paths: Ecumenical Learning, Conversing and Deepening Fundamental Human Experience

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March 5, 2009

Preface:

It is a great honour to hold the Nash Chair in Religion, and to be asked to deliver the Nash Lecture. Sometimes life takes us on a circular journey. My first year as an undergraduate at Campion, 1978-79, was Fr. Nash's last year as President of the College, and I remember him and the other Jesuits, faculty and staff of Campion from that period - and most particularly, Fr. Isidore Gorski - with affection and gratitude. During the three years that I had the opportunity to teach at Campion in the late 1990's, I had the privilege of serving on the Nash Lecture Committee, at the time when future Cardinal Avery Dulles delivered the Nash Lecture, and when Buddhist, Christian and Muslim theologians jointly addressed the religious foundations of hope facing a new millennium. All of this deepens my gratitude to College President Fr. Benjamin Fiore, Dean Samira McCarthy, and the members of the current Nash Lecture Committee for the gift and opportunity of being at Campion this semester and with you this evening.

Introduction:

Every two years, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome holds a Plenary Assembly, where its members attempt to name the current ecumenical situation and to give direction to the Catholic Church in its ecumenical undertakings. At the Plenary Assembly held in December of last year, Cardinal Walter Kasper noted in his Presidential Address that the shifting ecumenical landscape called for new ideas, strategies, projects and initiatives which would faithfully and creatively move us forward in the search for unity among Christians. The second (and principal) part of this lecture is an attempt to respond to that invitation, and is offered at a time when my own ecumenical focus has shifted from international bilateral relations to relations on a regional and local level. It will draw attention to three initiatives - one to do with ecumenical learning, a second concerning ecumenical cooperation in inter-religious dialogue, and a third seeking ecumenical efforts to give an account of our Christian hope - each of which looks to bridge the international ecumenical context and local ecumenical and pastoral concerns. It is my hope that they might have some resonance for those engaged in ecumenical work here on the Canadian prairies. Before turning to these initiatives, however, it will be useful to offer some initial reflections on the current ecumenical context, and on the larger socio-political context within which ecumenical relations are undertaken.

I. The Ecumenical Landscape

A. Achievements worth celebrating

Much has been achieved through the ecumenical dialogues which have been carried out over the last four decades. The richness of what we hold in common has come increasingly into view. As Pope John Paul II has noted, “(w)e no longer consider other Christians as distant or

strangers but see them as brothers and sisters.”¹ Through bilateral and multilateral statements, consensus has been reached or convergences mapped out on a wide range of subjects: on Christological doctrine; on the recognition of each other’s baptisms, and the meaning of the Eucharist; on the nature and mission of the Church; on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition; on ministry and authority within the Church; and on many other points of historical controversy. Of particular importance, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, authoritatively signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999, and more recently adhered to by the member churches of the World Methodist Council (2006), brought a significant degree of resolution to one of the principal disputes of the Reformation.² Anniversaries of founding figures of other Christian churches, such as Martin Luther and John Wesley, have provided opportunities to begin a reassessment of their lives and ministry and to take steps towards healing painful historical memories and bridging centuries of separation.³ In sum, ecumenical activity has become intrinsic to the Church’s life, many misunderstandings have been overcome, mutual respect has deepened, strong bonds of friendship

¹ Homily delivered during the Vespers celebrating the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of the *Decree on Ecumenism*, St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome, November 13th, 2004. The text can be found on the Vatican’s website at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041113_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

² The Joint Declaration can be found on the Vatican’s website at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html. The World Methodist Council’s statement of association with the Joint Declaration can be found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20060723_text-association_en.html.

³ On October 31, 1983, on the 300th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, Pope John Paul II sent a letter to Cardinal Willebrands to be read at anniversary celebrations in Germany. The letter - in its German original - can be found on the Vatican website at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1983/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19831031_card-willebrands_ge.html. On the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Wesley, Cardinal Walter Kasper preached a homily honouring Wesley on June 23rd, 2003, at the Ponte Sant’Angelo Methodist Church. The homily can be found on the Vatican’s website at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20030622_methodist-church_en.html.

have formed, and the quality of relationships between churches has been transformed.

While theological dialogue - often referred to as an *ecumenism of truth* - has tended to take place on the international or national stage, other means of seeking and strengthening unity among Christians have had a more direct impact on the lives of local churches. It has now become an ordinary occurrence for Christians to gather for common prayer (such as for the World Day of Prayer scheduled for tomorrow), to read and study the Scriptures together, or to give joint witness to the Gospel. Often referred to as *spiritual ecumenism*, such activities, along with ongoing internal ecclesial renewal and conversion, are described in the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* (§8) as the soul of the ecumenical movement.

Complementing spiritual ecumenism and theological dialogue is the *ecumenism of love*, which refers in the first instance to the reestablishment of relations of trust and affection between divided Christians and Christian communities, breaking down the suspicions and alienation built up over centuries of separation; and secondly, to joint cooperation in the pursuit of justice, in works of charity, and in the service of the common good. One example of common mission which comes to mind this evening is the organization 'Friends on the Outside', which is an ecumenical initiative to support prisoners both while they are in the prison system and once they are released back into the community; I mention it because this evening they are holding a fundraising dinner and I know a number of people who would like to have attended both that event and this lecture. A second example is the relationship between Luther and Campion Colleges on this campus, which offers a local reflection of the improved relations between Lutherans and Catholics worldwide. In general, friendship and trust pervade the relations between Luther and Campion, the Deans and chaplaincies in particular work closely together, there is a lively

intellectual interchange between faculty and students of the colleges, and numerous outreach projects and initiatives are jointly organized. This was already the case some 30 years ago, when I was a Campion student who lived in the Luther College residence and took a large number of Religious Studies classes there, from the great Dr. Roland Miller and from professors who are still teaching there at present. Indeed my own ecumenical formation began within the context of the healthy relationship between the two colleges.

B. Continuing and new struggles

Yet there is something revealing in the fact that despite subsequent important ecumenical agreements on an international level, those relations haven't changed significantly on the ground in the past 30 years. Often, in trying to show the achievements of the ecumenical movement, we offer the comparison of present day attitudes and practices relating to other Christian churches vs. the attitudes and practices of 50 or 60 years ago. And that does bring to light a whole sea change that has taken place. But most of that sea change took place in the decade immediately following the Second Vatican Council, and not nearly so much has changed in the last three decades. Therefore, having identified some of the constructive ecumenical developments of the post-Vatican II period, we do well now to look candidly at *what we have not yet achieved*, attending to current obstacles, challenges and frustrations which characterize the current ecumenical moment. The following interrelated points are offered from a Catholic perspective, but some of these considerations would surely find echoes in other churches:

!While churches have invested time and resources in conducting bilateral and multilateral dialogues, there is a significant gap between the reports of dialogue commissions and the reception of their contents by the sponsoring churches. Volumes of agreed statements registering potential convergences and consensus have been permitted to collect

dust in libraries, and their potential capacity to renew and transform our churches has largely gone unreleased. The complexity and slow pace of formal response processes have led to a series of new initiatives to foster the reception of bilateral statements. Time will tell if these will be more effective than previous initiatives in this regard.⁴

! As a result of the limited reception of ecumenical agreed statements, there is a corresponding gap between the degree of faith shared by our churches and its full expression in our ecclesial lives.⁵ Cardinal Kasper has constructively suggested that we need to cultivate an *ecumenism of life* in order to live deeply and faithfully this period where we find ourselves in real but imperfect communion. Because the churches didn't simply diverge in their theology but actually lived separate ecclesial lives, "they need to come closer to each other again in their lives; they must get accustomed to each other, pray together, work together, live together".⁶ While the phrase *ecumenism of life* is relatively new, the idea isn't. In 1952, a World Council of Churches' Faith and Order

⁴ Different strategies to foster reception are being attempted. In 2001, the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church set up a new commission of bishops with one of its principal goals being the reception of ARCIC's agreed statements. In 2007, that commission - the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM) - published an agreed statement entitled *Growing Together in Unity and Mission: Building on 40 Years of Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2007) aiming to synthesize the work of Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue since its beginnings in 1970 and proposing practical initiatives that would reflect the degree of common faith. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is currently working on a 'harvest document' presenting the results of the Catholic Church's bilateral dialogues with its four longest standing dialogue partners in the West: the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on a series of subjects addressed in all four dialogues. Again, the aim is to foster the reception of the bilateral statements.

⁵ This point is stressed in IARCCUM's *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, which states: "it must be acknowledged that the progress towards agreement in faith achieved through the theological dialogue has been substantial, but that in the past four decades we have only just begun to give tangible expression to the incontrovertible elements of shared faith" (§7). The text proceeds to state: "we believe that it is the time to bridge the gap between the elements of faith we hold in common and the tangible expression of that shared belief in our ecclesial lives. The final section of this document therefore proposes some specific steps to deepen our fellowship in life and mission which we believe are responsibly open for us and would be appropriate for us to take in the present context" (§10).

⁶ "Enthusiasm for Ecumenism", *Priests and People*, 17 (1), January, 2003, pp. 3-8 (here citing p.6).

Conference endorsed what came to be known as the Lund Principle, which affirms that *churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately*. By contrast, we are inclined to live more by a reverse principle, namely that *churches tend to act separately except when exceptional circumstances compel them to act together*. Engagement in an ecumenism of truth, love and prayer invites churches to rethink their self-definition along ecumenical lines, but such rethinking does not come easily, and our churches' structures and operational patterns are not oriented towards such a new self-understanding.⁷

!We live in a world characterized by rapid change, wherein developments within both the social and physical sciences have resulted in challenges to traditional Christian teaching, practice and moral reasoning. Churches have struggled to discern a faithful response to these challenges. As a result of differing responses, churches have grown apart in areas where they once held common ground - concerning the role of women in ministry, issues pertaining to human sexuality, and a cluster of moral questions pertaining to the beginning and ending of human life. Controversies surrounding these questions have resulted in serious internal tensions and even fragmentation within some of the dialogue partners of the Catholic Church, and these internal tensions have further complicated ecumenical relations. Where there is uncertainty about where dialogue partners stand on divisive issues, the lack of internal consensus impedes efforts to achieve external (ecumenical) consensus.

!While much ecumenical work proceeds quietly ahead, hopes of major steps towards full visible unity have greatly diminished in recent years. As Paul Murray notes, "we are now in a position where it is widely recognized that, on most fronts, the aspiration for programmed structural

⁷ Cf. George Tavard, "For a Theology of Dialogue" in *One in Christ*, 15 (#1, 1979), pp. 11-12.

unity in the short-medium term is simply unrealistic.”⁸ There are exceptions, notably a series of regional or national agreements between Anglicans and Lutherans, who in various parts of the world including Canada find themselves in a relationship of full communion. Relations between Orthodox and Catholic Churches also continue to make important progress. But in many contexts, the relative lack of concrete steps towards unity in our churches despite the achievements of years of constructive dialogue has led to impatience, discouragement, ecumenical fatigue, and “decreased levels of interest in and commitment to the ecumenical cause across the traditions”.⁹

! The goal of full communion in faith, church order and sacramental life has also come under criticism from other and conflicting directions. From one perspective, perhaps in response to the intensification of secularization, some Christians and Christian communities have turned their attention increasingly inward: heightening their confessional identity, encouraging a preservationist mentality, and attributing little value to efforts seeking reconciliation among Christians. From the opposite direction, given voice in a wide range of ecclesial expressions, there has been a weakening of confessional bonds and a decreasing interest in the goal of structural unity. At the recent Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, one bishop related a discussion he had with a Reformed pastor in France, who articulated this position rather cleverly: “We used to kill each other. Then we just called each other terrible names. Then we started to talk to each other. Now we pray together, we cooperate in all sorts of ways. *Nous sommes pacifiquement divisée* - we are peacefully separated. What’s wrong with staying where we are?” The relatively new

⁸ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5-25 (here citing p.9).

⁹ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, in *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008), pp. 30-45 (here citing p. 34).

phenomenon of non-denominational or post-denominational Christianity is the most radical expression of this trend, wherein a commitment to Christ is not necessarily linked to being a member of a specific church, and where little attention is paid to continuing structural divisions.

! In recent years there has been an exponential growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. Some Pentecostals have long been engaged in ecumenical dialogue - the dialogue between Classical Pentecostals and the Catholic Church began in 1972 - while many other Pentecostals and Evangelicals have viewed the ecumenical movement with suspicion. One creative response to this situation has been the establishment of the Global Christian Forum, which seeks to engage those who to this point have not been part of the ecumenical movement, and to bring together Christians and churches who have not been in conversation with one another.

C. Against the backdrop of other global concerns

Ecumenical relations and initiatives always takes place within larger cultural and socio-political contexts, even if those contexts are not always being attended to. Anglican ecumenist Dame Mary Tanner helps us to make a vital connection in this regard, in her account of the few moments after the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* had just been finalized, after years of work, in Lima Peru in 1982:

The whole meeting rose to its feet and stood in silent prayer. I'm not sure any of us knew what a momentous moment that was in the history of the ecumenical movement. The remarkable fact that theologians from so many traditions could agree so much about sacraments and ministry. Relations between the churches would never be quite the same again. In the silence of that moment I looked out of the window. We were staying in a retreat house in a

beautiful oasis, flowers and trees and a stream running through. But what I saw was the high wall that surrounded us covered in barbed wire and outside the barren hills rose up where the scrub gave way to complete barrenness, there were a few half built shacks where the poor of Lima eked out some sort of existence - God knows how. The image has stayed with me. Here were Christians together enclosed, safeguarding our life-giving gifts of sacraments and ministry - life-giving treasures to be shared with the whole world, and outside our oasis was a world of starvation and poverty and suffering. If what we were doing had nothing to do with that world out there, then our ecumenical efforts were of no avail.”¹⁰

In that same spirit, as we look beyond the compound in early 2009, what do we see in the world that we need to take account of, what are some of the most salient challenges facing the Church and the human race as a whole? Let me briefly mention four:

Firstly, we live in a world which is marred by much deeper divisions than those which now separate Christian churches. Pope Benedict, in his recent address to the Diplomatic Corps at the Vatican (Jan. 8, 2009),¹¹ which at least symbolically is an address to the nations of the world, identified the various regional and national conflicts which have led to violence and war in the past year, and spoke of the necessity of deepening “our commitment to a culture of authentic peace”, reaffirming that “peace cannot be built when military expenses divert enormous human and material resources from projects for development, especially the development of the poorest peoples”. Despite the great effort and

¹⁰ The story was related in the context of an evening discussion on ecumenical relations and the search for Christian unity, entitled ‘Conversazione at Caravita’, in the Church of St. Francis Xavier, Rome, on March 31, 2004.

¹¹ The speech can be found on the Vatican website at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090108_diplomatic-corps_en.html.

longing of many for peace, violence and war continue to be an all too common means of dealing with conflicts. Too frequently, rather than persevering through avenues of dialogue and diplomacy, a spiral of violence is permitted to grow. Those who do not share the same beliefs and agendas are depicted as enemies; the innate human dignity of persons is not recognized; their freedom and security are not safeguarded; and people come to be seen as dispensable. Although international charters of human rights and rules regulating conflict are in place, they are too often ignored. Albert Einstein observed that “you cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war”, but that is a logic we are not yet ready to hear. There are signs of hope, for instance the significant recent steps towards peace in Ireland, where a seemingly intractable situation of conflict and violence has been addressed in ways attentive to dialogue, mutual understanding and respect. But as peoples and nations we still have much to learn concerning the use of tools of dialogue as a principal and mature means of resolving conflict.

Secondly, the environmental crisis and the reality of climate change signal that we have not been good stewards of our planet. In the West, we do not live in a way which is sustainable, and certainly not in a way which is replicable in other parts of the world if we are to live within the carrying capacity of earth’s ecosystems. Current scientific projections suggest that we are moving quickly into a period of crisis, where a concerted response from nations and peoples is urgently required. While on one level the unity of the human race remains an eschatological goal, there are aspects of that unity which cannot wait. As Martin Luther King Jr. stated regarding a different context, we will need to learn to live together as sisters and brothers or we will perish together as fools.

Thirdly, in the West we have constructed an economic system based on personal acquisition, which nurtures our desire for more things, but is not focused on meeting basic human needs, serving the common good and building community. A recent song entitled *Society* (written by Jerry

Hannan and sung by Eddie Vedder) sums it up well: “we have a greed with which we have agreed; and you think you have to want more than you need; until you have it all you won't be free.” Our market system depends on this ever increasing consumption. It does not counsel responsible production and consumption, but economic growth at all costs. Part of the consequence of our economic system and the unfettered greed which it has fostered is that over the past 30 years there has been a redistribution of wealth, with the poor becoming increasingly poor - both in Canada and internationally. In the current economic crisis this has been further exacerbated, with a wider range of people affected. In Canada, many have lost their savings, their jobs, their homes; in the developing world, people are losing access to the basic necessities of life. As the price of grains and rice has risen dramatically, an increasing number are threatened with starvation. In the address mentioned above, Pope Benedict noted that the current economic crisis cannot be properly addressed without “implementing an ethics based on the innate dignity of the human person”.

Finally, we live in a cultural context where secularizing trends present an enormous challenge to religious faith. Insights and perspectives from the physical and human sciences continue to shake the foundations of the faith worldview of many people, while a resurgent and dogmatic atheism directly confronts faith on various fronts, including advertisements on city buses declaring “There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” and books entitled *The God Delusion* and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.¹² The decline in membership in many churches in the Western world has been accompanied by an equally troubling phenomenon, the number of people who no longer feel confident looking to churches for meaning. Both in the context of pastoral ministry and in academic contexts, I have

¹² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Toronto : McClelland and Stewart, 2007).

had conversations with individuals - people of moral integrity, whose search for meaning is genuine - who are attracted to, or at least not adverse to, belief in God, who would like very much to lay hold of the hope which is borne of faith, but aren't convinced that it would be intellectually honest to do so. The third of the reconciling paths presented here finds its seedbed in such conversations, and most particularly in the pastoral and faith challenge of offering a convincing account of the hope that is within us.

D. Perseverance and grounds for hope

The intent of these brief overviews was not to give voice to the prophets of doom, who Pope John XXIII so roundly critiqued in the speech which opened the Second Vatican Council back in 1962. Rather, its aim was to put on the table, albeit in a very simplified way, some of the decisive challenges facing the human race, the Church, and the ecumenical movement, in order to reflect responsibly on ways forward. This is the context - ecumenically and globally - where creative new initiatives are needed.

On the ecumenical front, the fact that we still face enormous challenges does not by definition mean that the methods, instruments and strategies which have been developed in recent decades have been seriously flawed. Again from a Catholic perspective but one that would be shared by many others, the goal of full visible unity needs to continue to compel us forward, trusting that ultimately the work of unity is the work of the Holy Spirit. While holding to that goal, it is important to focus on the steps, even if they are small steps, which are open to us at the present moment; that is, to foster an ecumenism of the possible. Cardinal Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams have both spoken often in recent years about renewing our commitment to spiritual ecumenism, signalling the profound importance of common prayer and witness, ongoing internal renewal within our churches, and other activities which

strengthen the spiritual bonds which hold us together. The brief overview of global challenges facing us is an invitation to renew and deepen our commitment to common mission, working together and with others of similar vision in addressing societal issues such as those pertaining to war and peace, poverty and the environment. The ecumenism of truth, pursued most especially through dialogue, has borne good fruit and holds great promise, much of which has yet to be fulfilled. In each of these instances - spiritual ecumenism, an ecumenism of truth, of love, of life - we can recognize that the Spirit of God has been at work within us and our churches. While there is always the need to adapt and renew our ecumenical instruments and practices, more important still is the need to renew and strengthen our commitment to them.

Now in moving from this first part of the lecture to the second, it's worth reiterating that in thinking about what might be proposed here in terms of new initiatives, my own context was one of transition, from a quite specific experience of ecumenical engagement centred at the Vatican, back to the world which is home in all its richness and particularity. The single experience over those seven years which has most deeply left its imprint, and which I most want to continue to reflect on and to bring back as a gift for this context in whatever way possible, is that of working on bilateral dialogue commissions. Many participants in ecumenical dialogue are convinced, as I am, that the methods for seeking reconciliation carefully worked out by bodies such as the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) or the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission offer a resource and a gift for the Church universal which has not yet been fully tapped and appreciated. A brief account of the method and work of these dialogue commissions serves here as something of a preface and backdrop to the three initiatives which follow.

In bilateral dialogues, commission members generally live, pray, eat, plan, discuss and draft together during the course of their annual week-long meetings. Much work also takes place between the meetings. Aided by the close working relationships and friendships which develop, and driven by the common aim of seeking reconciliation as they approach the Scriptures, tradition, and their separate histories on the theological subject under investigation, dialogue commissions have frequently been able to find common ground and take significant and surprising steps towards the resolution of long-standing conflicts.¹³ Ottawa Dominican Jean Tillard, who served on ARCIC from its inception in 1970 till his death in 2000, offered a keen insight into the working of an effective dialogue commission in stating that “as a Commission we found ourselves living and experiencing the tragic drama of our two churches”; the unity being sought was one which “together we were already experiencing”.¹⁴ Working on a dialogue commission, the real but imperfect communion between churches can be experienced with immediacy and forcefulness.

While it is vital that dialogue participants be able to articulate their church’s teachings and beliefs with confidence, the context is also highly conducive to recognizing the faith of the other, and to seeing the

¹³ Christopher Hill, Anglican co-secretary for most of the first phase of ARCIC, noted that there was a forging of communion among members, such that they increasingly became “a stable and trusting group of Christian friends, dedicated to the restoration of communion.” See ‘ARCIC-I and II: An Anglican Perspective’, *From Malines to ARCIC: the Malines Conversations Commemorated*, Albert Denaux (ed.), (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), pp. 133-148 (here citing p. 137). The dialogue documents themselves at times witness to the importance of the Commission’s methodology. ARCIC’s *Authority I* (1976) states: “For a considerable period theologians in our two traditions, without compromising their respective allegiances, have worked on common problems with the same methods. In the process they have come to see old problems in new horizons and have experienced a theological convergence which has often taken them by surprise” (§25). *Authority in the Church I* can be found in Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report* (London: CTS/ SPCK, 1982).

¹⁴ “J.M.R. Tillard”, *Encounters for Unity: Sharing Faith, Prayer and Life*, G. R. Evans, Lorelei F. Fuchs, Diane C. Kessler (eds.), (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995), pp. 196-202 (here citing pp. 199 -200).

integrity of the dialogue partner as one who desires to love God, to be a faithful disciple of Christ, to be obedient to the Holy Spirit. George Tavard, who served on both ARCIC and the Methodist-Catholic dialogue for many years, noted that dialogues foster a desire to “enter as deeply as possible into the mindset of the other side.”¹⁵ In turn, this has enabled a constructive approach to past areas of conflict, allowing members to approach the separated history of their dialogue partners empathetically and with the fewest possible obstacles to reception.¹⁶

It’s my experience and conviction that there is a wisdom which has emerged from these dialogue commissions, and that there is a grace and a gift which has yet to be fully received, both in the ecumenical sphere and in other areas of ecclesial life. Furthermore, they provide a witness to conflict resolution which the world could well learn from, and which could be adapted for fostering reconciliation in many other contexts.

While the three initiatives presented in the remainder of this lecture are not explicitly seeking to replicate the methodology of bilateral dialogues, you will likely see traces of that methodology in each of them. Likewise, these initiatives are not intended as a comprehensive response to the urgent challenges previously mentioned confronting Church and world, but rather, mindful of those challenges, they are proposed to you as creative and constructive initiatives which might supplement the traditional paths to reconciliation. Following the principle of thinking globally and acting locally, each seeks in one way or another to bridge universal concerns and local contexts.

II. Renewed Focus on Learning: Receptive Ecumenism

¹⁵ “For a Theology of Dialogue” in *One in Christ*, 15 (1979), pp. 11-20 (here citing p.15).

¹⁶ These two paragraphs present a slightly condensed account of my treatment of bilateral methodology in “Receptive Ecumenism and Recent Initiatives in the Catholic Church’s Dialogues with the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council”, in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, pp. 271-84 (n.b. pp. 272-73).

George Tavard once wrote that each church would do well to look to the history of its dialogue partners during the centuries of separation, “to ask if it should not learn from the other... a memory that it has itself missed.”¹⁷ I’ve always liked the quote, and the notion of learning a memory belonging to others, a memory of what God has been doing in their midst. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II suggests something very similar when, in pondering why the Holy Spirit had permitted so many divisions between Christ’s disciples through the centuries, he asks: “Could it not be that these divisions have been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ’s Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise....”¹⁸

The implied notion that there are memories to be learned, insights of the Gospel to be retrieved, “Christian treasures of great value”¹⁹ to be found in other churches, is an underlying assumption at the heart of a new initiative entitled ‘Receptive Ecumenism’. Paul Murray, a lay Roman Catholic theologian teaching at the University of Durham, in the north of England, has coined the phrase, and coordinated two international colloquia, edited a major volume, and initiated a local pilot project to test and refine the governing principles and practice of what he hopes will be an initiative to encourage the revitalizing of Christian churches through ecumenical learning.²⁰ Murray offers a diagnosis of the current ecumenical landscape and proposes a pragmatic way forward.

¹⁷ “*The Final Report: Witness to Tradition*” in *One in Christ*, 32 (1996), pp. 118-129 (here citing p. 122).

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 153.

¹⁹ Addressing the observers at the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul spoke of having come into contact “with Christian treasures of great value” in the Christian communities they represented.

²⁰ The first colloquium, held in conjunction the University of Durham granting Cardinal Kasper an honorary doctorate, was held in January, 2006. The colloquium led to the publication of *Receptive*

On the one hand, Murray - as quoted earlier in this address - argues that the “once widely held hope for structural unification in the short-medium term is, in general, now widely recognised as unrealistic.”²¹ He also takes as a given the ecumenical fatigue which characterizes the current context, and laments the gap between what the dialogues have produced and “the amount of actual effective ecclesial learning that has taken place at more than a notional or theoretical level”, which he deems to be “rather slim”.²²

On the other hand, he strongly affirms the Catholic commitment to the goal of full visible unity as Christ’s will for the Church. Receptive ecumenism “firmly resists the relinquishing ... of any practically and strategically significant aspiration for full visible structural and sacramental unity and the correlative commitment to walking the way of ecclesial conversion that this requires”.²³ While full unity may be an eschatological reality, “it would be poor eschatology that led us to conclude that it is, therefore, a reality that is of no relevance to the contingencies of present existence”. Giving up on that goal is akin to “giving up on the aspiration for economic justice which will likewise always be elusive in this order”.²⁴

Given this assessment of the current ecumenical situation and an unbending commitment to the goal of full visible unity, Murray raises pragmatic questions: What does it mean “to live *now* oriented upon such

Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) edited by Paul Murray. A second colloquium was held near Durham in January, 2009, and a second volume with Oxford University Press is in the planning.

²¹ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 32.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁴ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, pp. 11-12.

goals?... What is the appropriate ethic for life between the times in relation to this calling?”²⁵

Locating the ecumenical task within the context of larger challenges confronting Western society, he suggests that “(t)he key question of our age is as to whether we can *live difference* for mutual flourishing rather than mutually assured destruction.”²⁶ The notion of living difference well suggests, however, not only a secular challenge but also an ecclesiological one, grounded in the nature of a Trinitarian God. The churches “are called in their very living and working together to be sacramental of - a living witness to - difference well-lived in the conviction that difference well-lived goes to the very heart of the Trinitarian being of God”.²⁷ As suggested earlier in this lecture, the way in which Christians and Christian communities seek to address their differences through engaging in respectful and rigorous dialogue, turning together to the Scriptures, tradition and their separate histories, is a witness the world needs to hear. But Murray’s focus in this initiative is not on dialogue so much as on learning from the differences in other Christian traditions: “receptive ecumenical learning within and between the separated Christian traditions goes to the very heart of the evangelical call to witness to the possibility of living reconciled difference for mutual flourishing in a world of blood-soaked conflict.”²⁸

Receptive Ecumenism is in the first instance not a project but an ethic, one which draws part of its inspiration from the ‘turn to the other’ espoused by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In a context of division, it invites churches to move away from competition with the other and towards “the need to attend to and to act upon their specific

²⁵ Ibid., p.12; cf. “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 32.

²⁶ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 31; cf. p. 32 (italics mid-sentence mine).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁸ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 19.

responsibilities revealed in the face of the other”.²⁹ This implies more than simply tolerating the other, or coming to recognize the other’s approach as complementary and of value, but rather, delving into the “deep implications of the other’s differing perspective” for one’s ecclesial life, opening a space for the possibility of genuine learning.³⁰ “The basic principle is that considerable further ecumenical progress is indeed possible but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, make a clear, programmatic shift from prioritising the question, ‘What do our various others first need to learn from us?’ to asking instead, ‘What do *we* need to learn and what can *we* learn - or receive - with integrity from *our* others?’”³¹ The invitation to churches here is for each tradition to take “responsibility for its own potential learning from others” and to be “willing to facilitate the learning of others as requested but without either requiring how this should be done, or even making others’ learning a precondition to attending to one’s own.”³² Such an ethic can be embraced at every level of ecclesial life. Murray suggests that it is “as simple yet all pervasive as the gospel it represents”, with a starting point which “befits the character of Christian life, the way of hope-filled conversion.”³³

American Jesuit Thomas Reese, who delivered an address at the first Receptive Ecumenism conference in 2006, observed that while in the past many saw reform within the Roman Catholic Church as essential to ecumenical progress, “(t)oday the reverse is also true: ecumenism is an essential path to church reform”.³⁴ Paul Murray expands on this by

²⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁰ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 41.

³¹ Ibid., p. 32.

³² “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 15; cf. pp. 12, 17.

³³ Ibid., pp. 16, 12.

³⁴ Thomas J. Reese, “Organizational Factors Inhibiting Receptive Catholic Learning”, in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, pp. 346-356 (here citing p. 354).

speaking of ecumenical relations as a privileged context for ecclesial growth;³⁵ “ecumenical learning *across* traditions” can be seen as a key resource for “unlocking the potential for transformation *within* traditions”.³⁶ He envisages how receptive ecumenical learning could lead each tradition to be “fruitfully re-imagined in the light of its own ecumenical others”;³⁷ at heart, it offers “a long-term learning opportunity in which the churches might progress towards their calling and destiny in the only way possible - by slow and difficult growth in maturity”.³⁸ Such growth is not something that can be programmed or anticipated; it is likely to come in an *ad hoc* way, “on many fronts, albeit somewhat unpredictably”.³⁹

There is an intrinsic humility built into the notion of ecumenical learning. At one and the same time it fosters a keen attentiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the other, and a self-critical eye to oneself and one’s church, with the aim of being converted ever more deeply. It is a matter of both recognizing our own weaknesses and sticking points, and “of falling in love with the experienced presence and action of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition”.⁴⁰ Alternatively put, an ethic of receptive learning asks “how the difficulties in one’s own tradition might, with integrity, be creatively addressed ... in the light of learning from one’s significant ecumenical others.”⁴¹ This can be asked and has transformative potential even when other avenues of ecumenical progress and activity are blocked. In ecumenical circles, it is almost creedal to say that the more we are converted to Christ, the closer we move to one another. In Paul

³⁵ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 33.

³⁶ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 7.

³⁷ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 32.

³⁸ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 15.

³⁹ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 33.

⁴⁰ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 15; cf. p. 12.

⁴¹ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, p. 39; cf. “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 16.

Murray's formulation, the suggestion is that through our ecumenical encounters and efforts, we also have the potential to come closer to Christ. Receptive learning "will move us closer to finding ourselves in the other, the other in ourselves, and each in Christ."⁴²

Murray suggests that such learning would make each Christian community more authentically itself. It would not be a matter of making the Catholic Church less Catholic but "more fully, more richly Catholic and, hence, more fully, more richly the church of Christ; more clearly the 'sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind'..."⁴³ Receptive Ecumenism "is about the intensification, complexification, and further realization of Catholic identity, not its diminishment and loss."⁴⁴ It is worth a brief excursus at this point to turn to authoritative Catholic teaching in order to set forward the ecclesiological foundations, often misunderstood, on which Murray's argument is built.

No passage from the Second Vatican Council has been at the centre of as much discussion as *Lumen Gentium* §8, which states that the Church of Christ "subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him." The text proceeds to state: "Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity".

The ecclesial elements present in other Christian Communities - sometimes referred to as "elements and endowments which together go

⁴² "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda", p.16; cf. "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs", pp. 33, 39.

⁴³ "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda", p. 18 citing *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964), §1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

to build up and give life to the Church”,⁴⁵ or as “elements of the Christian patrimony of truth and holiness” (*Ecumenical Directory* §76a) - “constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between (other Christian Communities) and the Catholic Church. To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them”.⁴⁶ These ecclesial elements found outside the visible limits of the Catholic Church are not to be viewed in a minimalist way; the *Ecumenical Directory* §61b speaks of “some - even many and very valuable” elements present in other Christian Communities (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio* §3).

By virtue of baptism, members of other Christian Communities are to be regarded by the Catholic faithful as fellow Christians, as brothers and sisters in the Lord (*Ut Unum Sint* §13; cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio* §3) who, through baptism, are “truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, and reborn to a sharing of the divine life” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §22); they are “members of Christ’s body”, and live in real though incomplete communion with the Catholic Church (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §3).

Two passages from *Unitatis Redintegratio* more directly lay the foundations for a Catholic understanding of an ecumenical learning. Addressing the Eastern Churches, §17 states: “In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) §3; cf. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* (henceforth *Ecumenical Directory*), Vatican City, 1993, §61b.

⁴⁶ *Ut Unum Sint* (Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II), 1995, §11.

various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting”.⁴⁷ The internal logic of *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* would support the conclusion that while this might be particularly true of Eastern Churches, the principle herein also applies to Christian Communities in the West. Addressing the whole ecumenical landscape, *Unitatis Redintegratio* §4 notes that “Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren.... Nor should we forget that anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can be a help to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church”. In turn, *Ut Unum Sint* speaks of the “clear ecclesiological vision” of the Second Vatican Council, “open to all the ecclesial values present among other Christians” (§10).

From these texts, we can offer an initial sketch of the sort of ecumenical learning which is envisaged in these documents. Wherever elements of the Church have been more effectively emphasized in other Christian Communities, wherever the fruits of the Holy Spirit have been received in ways which differ but are complementary to their reception in the Catholic Church, wherever a fuller appreciation of any aspect of revelation is found, we can speak of gifts which could be received by the Catholic Church, gifts with the potential to lead its faithful to “a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* §4). In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II expresses a certain confidence that such learning has already been taking place through dialogue over the past decades. “Along the way that leads to full unity, I have said how we are aware, as the Catholic Church, that we

⁴⁷ In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II reiterates that in other Churches and Christian communities, “certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized” (§14).

have received much from the witness borne by other Churches and Ecclesial Communities to certain common Christian values, from their study of those values, and even from the way in which they have emphasized and experienced them” (§87). Ecumenical encounter “works to awaken a reciprocal fraternal assistance, whereby Communities strive to give in mutual exchange what each one needs in order to grow towards definitive fullness in accordance with God’s plan (cf. *Eph* 4:11-13)” (*Ut Unum Sint* §87).

Such learning has the potential to give greater expression to the catholicity of the Church. *Unitatis Redintegratio* §4 notes that divisions among Christians make it more difficult for the Catholic Church to express in actual life its full catholicity in all its bearings. In this regard, Cardinal Kasper’s explanatory comments are helpful: “In dialogue we can learn from each other... In the same measure that we grow and mature by dialogue to the fullness of Jesus Christ (cf. *Eph* 4,13), the Church also realizes more concretely what she is, what she has always been and ever shall be; she achieves a fuller concrete realisation of her catholicity”.⁴⁸

Finally, the concept of ecumenical learning is clearly implied in the notion that ecumenical dialogue involves not only an exchange of ideas but also an ‘exchange of gifts’, as proposed by Pope John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* (§28). While an exchange of ideas can fruitfully move relations forward, allowing a clearer recognition of gifts and endowments of the Holy Spirit in the other and thus inviting a corresponding exchange of gifts, the latter is understood by John Paul as being a dynamic process. Attentiveness to the spiritual gifts and endowments found in other Churches and Christian Communities is “not a matter of becoming aware of static elements passively present in

⁴⁸ “The ecumenical movement in the 21st century - A contribution from the PCPCU”, given by Cardinal Walter Kasper at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 18 November, 2005.

(them)” (*Ut Unum Sint* §49). Ecumenical learning, whether reciprocal (an exchange of gifts) or not, fundamentally concerns how gifts of the Spirit objectively come alive in the dialogue partner, how the transformative grace of God has come to expression in the other. Pope John Paul II proceeds to speak of a “vast new field” which has opened up ecumenically, pertaining to the life in Christ which is in evidence in other Christians (§48). In one of the most beautiful sentences in *Ut Unum Sint*, he notes that ecumenical relations over the past decades have “enabled us to discover what God is bringing about in the members of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities” (§48; italics mine).

In light of these foundations, Paul Murray is right when he says that the Catholic Church is not only a teaching church: “it is an authentically Catholic instinct always to ask - with due discernment, criticism, and appropriate concern for integrity intact - after the truth potentially to be learned from the other, whomsoever the other might be”.⁴⁹ In this instance, as was mentioned at the outset, the learning is connected to the recognition that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the other, and is ultimately the source of any authentic gift which we might learn and receive from the other. In the words of a recent Methodist-Roman Catholic agreed statement, “(t)he Holy Spirit is the true giver of the gifts we are seeking to exchange”.⁵⁰

The Catholic Co-Chair of the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue, Bishop Michael Putney of Townsville, Australia, who was also a participant at the first Receptive Ecumenism colloquium, expanded on this by appealing to the ecclesiological principles just set forth. If we believe our dialogue partners are bound to Christ, and that Holy Spirit is at work in them, we can trust that they are being “drawn by Christ toward the full realisation of his will for their ecclesial identity”.

⁴⁹ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *The Grace Given You in Christ* (Lake Junaluska, N. C.: World Methodist Council, 2006), §97.

Therefore we can properly look to our dialogue partners “expectant of discovering in them some version of all of those elements which one believes Christ wills for his Church”, and thus with a receptivity to learn from them.⁵¹ Putney therefore sees dialogue as involving “a process of discovering in the other what the Holy Spirit has done to conform them to Christ and his wishes for the Church”.⁵² The same logic would hold in terms of receptive learning: approaching the task of ecumenical learning from this perspective allows a receptivity and openness which need not and should not involve compromising one’s own ecclesial identity.

Paul Murray notes that he could say of Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning what William James said of pragmatism in his 1907 volume on the subject - it is ‘A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking’.⁵³ It aims to draw out and focus attention on “a value that has been at work, to some degree at least, in all good ecumenical encounter” and accord it “a strategic, programmatic priority”.⁵⁴

From a Catholic perspective, the work of bilateral dialogues and the Receptive Ecumenism ethic and initiative are shaped by the same foundational principles; both are constructive examples of the reception of the Second Vatican Council’s ecumenical vision. The Receptive Ecumenism initiative isn’t intended as a critique of bilateral dialogues, but a complement to them, building on agreements they have reached and good relations they have contributed to establishing, but hopefully having a greater transformative effect which can touch the local context

⁵¹ “Receptive Catholic Learning Through Methodist-Catholic Dialogue”, in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, pp. 122-33 (here citing p. 124).

⁵² Ibid., 124-25.

⁵³ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 12.

⁵⁴ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, pp. 32, 39.

more directly.⁵⁵ To flesh out the local applicability of the Receptive Ecumenism ethic, Murray convinced church leaders in the northeast of England to undertake a pilot project, in which over a three year period they would meet to address three areas of church life: governance and finance, leadership and ministry, and learning and formation. Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Salvation Army and United Reformed Churches are participating in the project, in which representatives of the churches - with the help of experts from the fields being investigated - will look to identify and describe the structures and practices of each participant tradition, and to examine “how respective specific difficulties in these various cultures and practices might fruitfully be addressed by learning from, or receiving of, examples of ‘best practice’ in the other traditions.”⁵⁶ In Murray’s words, the project will be a way of testing thinking about Receptive Ecumenism by “getting into the life-blood and complex living realities of the local church”, and hopefully modelling receptive ecumenical learning for the wider church.⁵⁷

In conclusion to this section, I would simply note a number of aspects of the initiative which I find helpful. Paul Murray’s reading of the current ecumenical context is at once realistic and profoundly hopeful, grounded as it is in an eschatological “promise of and calling to being made one in the Trinitarian life of God.”⁵⁸ And while that eschatological hope shines brightly, as in the Gospel, that promise makes rigorous demands for transformation in the present. Murray writes that Receptive Ecumenism “is driven by a fundamental conviction about what it means to live, precisely in the nit and grit particularities of the here and now, the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 40, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁶ “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, pp. 43-44.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 43; cf. p. 45.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

eschatological calling that defines Christian existence.”⁵⁹ Elsewhere he uses a splendid metaphor in this regard, saying that “the Christian task is not so much to assert and to construct the Kingdom as *to lean into its coming*; to be shaped and formed in accordance with it so as to become channels for its anticipatory realization and showing in the world.”⁶⁰ Ecumenical work needs both that hope and that calling which places real demands on us in the present moment. I also appreciate how Receptive Ecumenism speaks unabashedly about learning from others, and that such learning needn’t always be reciprocal. There is a real invitation to take seriously the consequences of recognizing gifts of the Holy Spirit and elements of the Church in each other, and of taking responsibility for our own growth and conversion in that regard. All of that seems to resonate with the pragmatic thrust of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Finally, I appreciate the witness value for the world in living difference well, and the challenge that addresses to Christian communities to seek to be reconciled and to do so in a way which witnesses to the Gospel by being truly Christ-like in its methodology.

III. Tents of Meeting and the Repair of the World: Scriptural Reasoning

The Jewish novelist Chaim Potok, author of the wonderful novels *The Chosen*, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita’s Harp*, relates a key moment in his adolescence when he discovered that he wanted to write novels. His Orthodox Jewish parents were emigrants from Eastern Europe, and the New York neighbourhood in which he grew up was a transplanted and almost self-contained Orthodox Jewish world. At age sixteen, never having read a serious contemporary novel, he found Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* in the local library and signed it out. He writes:

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁰ “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda”, p. 11, italics mine.

I will never forget the experience of reading *Brideshead Revisited*. The *world* of that book - how other than my own it was!.... Once I felt myself comfortable with the novel's prose and at home in its strange world, I began to sense its mesmerizing power. I read day after day, awed by the tenacious faith of the mother of that aristocratic English Catholic family, by the wavering faith of the daughter and the disintegrating being of the young man, and by the gradual advance into that faith of the one who was telling the story. I lived more deeply inside the world of that novel than I lived inside my own world for the length of time it took me to read it.⁶¹

In his astonishment at the power of narrative to draw one into a world other than one's own, he "began to read ravenously, and to write".⁶² Potok's early novels all deal with protagonists who are immersed in the heart of Jewish tradition - Jewish texts, faith and culture - and who, for a variety of reasons, end up in a profound encounter, even confrontation, with the very centre of another - radically different - worldview. In writing about these novels, Potok speaks of his characters as being entangled in a *core-to-core cultural confrontation*.⁶³ It is not the peripheries meeting; rather, his characters, from the heart of their Jewish reading of the world, encounter the core of another tradition, and the result - other than making for great novels - is that in the dangers and possibilities of that intersection of strong traditions, each must find a lived answer. The result for me as a reader of these novels some 25 years ago was that entering into the world of Potok's characters - Reuven Malter, Danny Sanders, Davita Chandal, Asher Lev - allowed me to go back to my own world and discover that the horizons had expanded, the landscape had changed.

⁶¹ Chaim Potok, "The Invisible Map of Meaning: A Writer's Confrontations", in *TriQuarterly* 84 (Spring/Summer 1992), pp. 21-23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-35.

The second reconciling path that I would like to introduce offers a model of inter-religious dialogue involving the Abrahamic faiths, wherein the core identities of these traditions are at the heart of the encounter. Entitled ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, the initiative began in the mid-1990’s, and found inspiration in the Jewish practice of *chevruta* study, the “ancient rabbinic method of studying Jewish texts” where students, in very small group settings, engage with the texts and with each other.⁶⁴ As an inter-faith adaptation of *chevruta* study, Scriptural Reasoning is “a wisdom-seeking engagement with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures”.⁶⁵ While there is a growing body of literature about Scriptural Reasoning, as well as an online journal connected with the University of Virginia, there is no authoritative definition or description of the initiative. It is an open-ended practice of bringing together, in small groups, scriptural text scholars and theologians from the three Abrahamic traditions to read together from the scriptures and accompanying literature of the three traditions, around a particular theme. At once a faith and an academic exercise, it is a “reading- and reasoning-in-dialogue” which “preserves difference as it establishes relationships”.⁶⁶

Anglican theologian David Ford, a leading exponent of Scriptural Reasoning, identifies one of its central tenets, concerning the way in which scholars are invited to remain faithful to the integrity of their own traditions while showing openness and respect to others: participants “(a)cknowledge *the sacredness* of the others’ scriptures to them (without having to acknowledge its authority for oneself) - each believes in different ways (which can be discussed) that their scripture is in some sense from God and that the group is interpreting it before God, in God’s

⁶⁴ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 278-79, citing from footnote 14.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 273.

⁶⁶ From the homepage of the *Student Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* at <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/abraham/sjsr/sjsrwhat.html>; Steven Kepnes “A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning (draft)”, found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/KepHand.html>.

presence, for God's sake".⁶⁷ Jewish scholar Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia, who has played a key role in the emergence of the initiative, writes that "scriptural reasoning allows us to seek after God's word in our own ways, even though these ways pass through the very happy place of dialogue and warm fellowship".⁶⁸ But it also draws in and seeks to respond to the concerns of the world. Mindful that "some of the most grave problems that plague today's world are generated by tensions between Jews and Muslims and Christians", and motivated by "a global awareness of the predominance of human suffering", it seeks to "release sources of wisdom and compassion for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world".⁶⁹ It is an inter-faith enterprise, not an ecumenical one, but is an example of potential ecumenical cooperation as Christians seek to engage together in inter-religious dialogue and relations.

The exercise of Scriptural Reasoning is an encounter of traditions at their core because it centres around the scriptures; for each of these traditions, "scripture is at the heart of its identity".⁷⁰ While the scriptures are understood differently in the three traditions, each acknowledges their scriptural texts as sacred. Steven Kepnes, Professor of Jewish Studies and Religion at Colgate University and author of a brief handbook for Scriptural Reasoning, notes that each tradition sees the scriptures as "sources of revelation, community, and guidance. To use a phrase from Martin Buber, the text is to be regarded as a 'Thou' capable of addressing us as its expectant readers."⁷¹ David Ford adds

⁶⁷ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, pp. 279-80.

⁶⁸ Peter Ochs, "Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together", Address at the Inauguration of Dr. Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 10th, 2005; found on the internet at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/ochs-princeton.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Steven Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning" in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (ed. David Ford and C. C. Pecknold) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 23-39 (here citing pp. 25, 28); Steven Kepnes "A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning (draft)".

⁷⁰ David Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians and Muslims" in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, pp. 1-22 (here citing p. 1).

⁷¹ "A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning (draft)".

that “the most obvious truth ... about Muslim, Christian and Jewish scriptures (is) that they are above all concerned with God”.⁷² “Scriptures are formative for understanding God and God’s purposes; for prayer, worship and liturgy; for normative teaching; for imagination and ethos; and so on.... Any attempt to deal with the core identity of any of the three will inevitably involve its scripture.”⁷³

In reading through literature discussing Scriptural Reasoning, one frequently comes across the recognition that while Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures all bear witness to revelation, they do so in very different ways. Those differences seem rarely laid out in a systematic way in Scriptural Reasoning literature, but the leading exponents of the initiative have written eloquently from a personal perspective about the place of scriptures in their lives of faith. In an address at Princeton in 2005, Peter Ochs identified some of the principles by which he as a Jew approaches Scripture. In condensing what he says, nuances will be missed, so I hope these excerpts whet your appetite and send you on to the original. He begins:

I turn to Scripture for guidance on how to understand and act in the world.... (I)n terms drawn from Scripture, ‘turning for guidance’ means *lidrosh et hashem*, ‘inquiring after God,’ where the verb *lidrosh* connotes *derashah*: searching through the words of Scripture for meanings that are already there but not yet disclosed to me. For me, scriptural reasoning thus presumes both that God's instruction is revealed in Scripture and that what is revealed cannot be readily seen in the plain sense of the words of Scripture.... The plain sense speaks for all eternity, but the deeper meaning is disclosed only for the time and place of the seeker.... (*D*)*erashah*,

⁷² David Ford, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together”, Address at the Inauguration of Dr. Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 10th, 2005; found on the internet at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/ford-princeton.pdf>.

⁷³ David Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom”, p. 1.

seeking into the depths of Scripture, is a form of prayer: it is asking God, ‘how shall I understand this day? And what shall I therefore do?’.... (T)he seeker believes that God answers back, as it were, and then the seeker asks a more refined question, then God answers back, and that back and forth dialogue between prayerful seeker and the God of Scripture is what we mean by studying into the depths of Scripture as Scripture, provided we remember that this kind of study speaks only to the time and place of study.⁷⁴

With the same word of caution, permit me to read you a brief excerpt from Muslim scholar Aref Nayed’s address prepared for the same symposium in 2005. Nayed begins by introducing the notion that “reading the Qur'an, for a Muslim, ultimately means actively striving to be transformed and ‘characterized’ by it.... transformed in one's very character.”

As a Muslim, I am certain that the Qur'an is the very speech of Allah, and I strive to live the full implications of this certitude. I strive, all the days of my life, to bear the Qur'an in my heart, and to allow it to transform me from the inside so as to become my very character.... I approach the Qur'an with the reverence and respect that is ontologically and morally due to the very Speech of the Creator.

I take this Speech (which is the expression of an eternal divine capacity to speak, a speech which was already spoken by Allah to Himself in eternity, and which was from eternity in His divine Knowledge) to be a personal letter addressed especially to me, by my loving and compassionate God, in my present day circumstances. Through the Qur'an, I strive to hear my very Creator speak to me personally.... I learned from my tradition that the Qur'an in the heart is like the inhabitant of a house who

⁷⁴ Peter Ochs, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together”.

transforms it into a “home” by living in it and maintaining it. I know that without the Qur'an my heart, mind, and body would collapse just as a deserted house eventually degenerates.⁷⁵

Rather than offer a parallel account of the place of the Scriptures within Christian faith, I would turn to a brief reflection from the Jesuit theologian Daniel Madigan, who has long been engaged in Muslim-Christian dialogue, on the different understandings of the Qur'ân and Bible as Word of God. Madigan notes that while the Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as ‘People of the Scripture’, *ahl al-kitâb*, this is a problematic starting point for inter-faith dialogue. The Scriptures play a central role, of course, within Christianity. But “Christians are not people of the Scripture, but rather people of the Word. And that Word, we believe, is incarnate in Jesus Christ.” For the first generations of Christians, Scripture referred to their Jewish heritage, but it was the encounter with Christ that became the centre of their faith:

They lived either with the direct experience of the Word among them, or with the testimony of the apostolic community who bore witness to their experience of the Crucified and Risen One. Ultimately it is that testimony which becomes the scripture we call the New Testament. Scripture is testimony to the Word; words to put us in touch with The Word - the one made flesh in Jesus. Our starting point, then, in speaking with Muslims is not scripture, but rather the Word of God, or, as Muslims would put it, the Speech of God, *kalâm Allâh*. In Muslim faith, nothing less than God's eternal Speech has entered human history in the Qur'an.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Aref Ali Nayed, “Reading Scripture Together: Towards a Sacred Hermeneutics of Togetherness”, delivered at a symposium held in honour of Iain Torrance's inauguration as President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Mar. 10th, 2005. Found on the internet at <http://www.ptsem.edu/Publications/psb/VXXVIIn1/v26n1p48.htm>

⁷⁶ Daniel A. Madigan, “God's Word to the World: Jesus and the Qur'ân, Incarnation and Recitation”, lecture delivered at Adelaide College of Divinity, July 13th, 2006. See also Daniel A.

Madigan adds that this needn't be seen as a Christian sleight-of-hand. Already 40 years ago, "the Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr had recognized that it was a category mistake to compare the Gospel and the Qur'ân: 'The word of God in Islam is the Qur'ân; in Christianity it is Christ.'⁷⁷ The caution which this brief excursus invites, one which could usefully be addressed more directly in the literature of Scriptural Reasoning, is that parallels between the sacred texts of the three traditions can fall into a category error unless reference is consistently made to the more comprehensive category of the Word (or Speech) of God.

While mindful of the different roles that Scripture plays in each tradition, David Ford and Peter Ochs would nonetheless argue the importance and value of a conversation which takes Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures as starting point and central focus of discussion, allowing each tradition to communicate the framework of faith through which its scriptures are to be approached. Ford notes that when Scriptural Reasoning works well, what happens is a "close engagement with each other's texts in a spirit simultaneously of academic study, of being true to one's own convictions and community, and of truth-seeking and peace-seeking conversation wherever that might lead."⁷⁸ He suggests that it could help to fill the serious need for collegial structures which bring the core identities of Muslims, Jews and Christians into sustained relationship and conversation.⁷⁹ Ochs notes the challenge of locating ways to speak meaningfully of scripture "across traditions", and asserts: "For Scriptural Reasoning, such ways can be located only *in* the practice of reading scriptures together, so that each scripture and each

Madigan, "People of the Word: Reading John with a Muslim" in *Review and Expositor* 104/1 (2007), pp. 81-95.

⁷⁷ Ibid., citing Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966; Second edition Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), p. 43.

⁷⁸ David Ford, "Faith in the Third Millennium".

⁷⁹ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 275.

tradition is in play, no one tradition dominates, each offers hospitality to the other to read and interpret, and no one can predict what will arise out of a session of such study, nor out of the next session and the next.”⁸⁰

That open-ended dimension of the process is also paralleled by a considerable flexibility in the way in which groups go about Scriptural Reasoning. A quick overview of some of the insights and patterns of meeting which have emerged will help to give a better understanding of the initiative. Ideally, the process is one which bridges the discourses of the academy and faith; scholars and theologians are invited to bring “both their sciences and their faiths” to the table. Thus the ‘reasoning’ in the initiative’s title refers “to the patterns of reasoning that are prompted by faithful-and-scientific studies of all three scriptural traditions, that are disciplined by contemporary practices of hermeneutics...”⁸¹

In any given session of Scriptural Reasoning, texts from the three traditions are chosen to be read and studied, centring around a particular person (e.g. Abraham) or theme (e.g. creation, sacrifice). In instances where there are a considerable number of participants, there are generally plenary assemblies with the whole group, then more intense work in small groups of six or nine persons.⁸² David Ford gives a specific example to help visualize the sort of discussion that might emerge:

Last month a group in Cambridge was joined by Rowan Williams the Archbishop of Canterbury for a two-hour session on Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Qur'an and Tanakh, and, from the New

⁸⁰ “Some Features of Scriptural Reasoning as an Academic Practice and as a Religious Practice” found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/OchFeat.html>.

⁸¹ “Some Features of Scriptural Reasoning as an Academic Practice and as a Religious Practice” found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/OchFeat.html>.

⁸² For further information regarding how Scriptural Reasoning groups function, see Steven Kepnes, “A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning”, pp. 37-39.

Testament, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Hebrew, Arabic and Greek flew around the room; the Hadith, the Talmud and patristic and medieval interpretations were drawn in; and all sorts of contemporary issues raised.⁸³

Two metaphors frequently used to describe Scriptural Reasoning help to further clarify both its approach and the dynamics of its meetings. Firstly, in the phrase of Aref Nayed, each participant is understood to be coming to the table with their own 'internal library'.⁸⁴ Nayed writes: "As I read (the Qur'ân), the Prophet of Allah (Peace be upon him) and all his testimonies (*hadiths*) are with me. As I read, my beloved teachers are with me. As I read, scholars and sages from the fourteen hundred years of Muslim living are with me. My family, my friends, my neighbors, and my entire community (*umma*) are with me." He also proceeds to say that his "Catholic teachers from the Gregorian and the Biblical Institute in Rome" are with him, his "Jewish teachers from Guelph, and more recently, the members of the Scriptural Reasoning community" are with him.⁸⁵ Steven Kepnes helps to unpack the concept of internal libraries, saying one's library might start with specific linguistic skills, and "includes historical information, theology, modern and postmodern philosophy and science. It also includes previous readings of the texts and hearings of it in ritual and liturgical contexts and, finally, understandings of God, the present historical moment, and the reasoner's own personal life."⁸⁶

The second metaphor frequently used in Scriptural Reasoning, drawing on the Abrahamic tradition as a common reference point, describes the place of encounter as a 'tent of meeting'. Each person engaged in

⁸³ David Ford, "Faith in the Third Millennium".

⁸⁴ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 279.

⁸⁵ Aref Ali Nayed, "Reading Scripture Together: Towards a Sacred Hermeneutics of Togetherness".

⁸⁶ Steven Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning", p. 31.

Scriptural Reasoning comes from a particular ‘house’, that is, “a specific tradition of worship and belief”, of study and faithful living, “shaped and reshaped over time by practices of remembering a group's encounters with God ...and of being educated and renewed through this memory.”⁸⁷ Scriptural Reasoning does not, however, meet in any tradition’s ‘house’, but rather in a space in between those houses, in a space likened to a biblical ‘tent of meeting’. Ford notes that the metaphor of tent evokes Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality as recounted in Genesis 18, as Scriptural Reasoning invites “a three-way mutual hospitality: each is host to the others and guest to the others as each welcomes the other two to their ‘home’ scripture and its tradition of interpretation.”⁸⁸ Meeting in a tent also “suggests the fragility of a network of Jews, Muslims and Christians” who belong to ‘houses’ but who together meet in an in-between space, “this lightly structured setting”.⁸⁹

Discussions in the tent of meeting don’t often lead to consensus, nor do they aim to; but they do often lead to friendship.⁹⁰ They provide a space of listening, of learning and of teaching. Willie Young notes that “you teach members of other communities about your scriptures and how your community reads them”, but “you also hear how participants from other traditions, in light of their scriptural reading, read *your*

⁸⁷ Peter Ochs, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together”; “Some Features of Scriptural Reasoning as an Academic Practice and as a Religious Practice”.

⁸⁸ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 279. In “Faith in the Third Millennium”, Ford identifies some of the values which are conducive to Scriptural Reasoning and give concrete expression to hospitality: “the value of imagination and compassion in understanding and assessing each others’ interpretations; recognition of immersion in messy history; the need to resist the temptation to reach for the security and satisfaction of clear, decisive answers to questions in dispute among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and to value mutual questioning and exploration; the willingness, on the one hand, to enter into dispute for the sake of God’s truth and love, and, on the other hand, to recognize the strength of our bonds in the family of Abraham and the call to live patiently with our deep differences; and throughout to conduct our reading according to an ethics, and even politics, of justice, love and forgiveness.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁹⁰ David Ford, “Faith in the Third Millennium”.

scriptures.”⁹¹ When all goes well, the experience is a powerful one. David Ford writes:

“For most members of each tradition, including myself, worship together by Muslims, Christians and Jews is not appropriate. But if, as people who pray, we enter into joint scripture study together, perhaps this is as near as we can or should come to sharing in the intensity of worship that is at the heart of synagogue, church and mosque. Around the (Scriptural Reasoning) table are people who acknowledge that *this reading is done before the living God*, however differently we might identify God.”⁹²

Scriptural Reasoning is, in the final analysis, an exercise carried out “for God’s sake and the sake of God’s purposes” - in praise of God and relating “to God all that we are and think and hope and do”;⁹³ and it is carried out for the sake of the world and its healing. Aref Nayed writes:

Reading together is a most fascinating kind of reading, and today, in our cruel and torn-apart world, it becomes a divine imperative for all of us. We urgently need a sacred hermeneutics of togetherness. Such a hermeneutics would set as its main task that of describing how reading scripture together works, and how it can mend and repair our shattered world.⁹⁴

Steven Kepnes echoes this, suggesting that at a final stage in the discussion, Scriptural Reasoning asks how its reading and conversation

⁹¹ Willie Young, “Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Minds”: Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”, lecture to the Canton Interfaith Association, Canton, Massachusetts, January 2004; the text can be found at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/YouTran.html>.

⁹² David Ford, “Faith in the Third Millennium”.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Aref Ali Nayed, “Reading Scripture Together: Towards a Sacred Hermeneutics of Togetherness”.

might “bring more understanding, more critical insight, more repair, more peace and healing to the world?” The major social, ethical and spiritual questions of the day are also part of what brings scriptural reasoners together in the first place: “Our prior awareness of these issues remains with us at every moment as we prepare for a session and travel through it.” And while a respectful conversation between Jews, Muslims and Christians concerning their scriptures “is an act of peace making and healing” in itself, there is also the hope that the reasoning process will lead to new insight into what is needed to bring repair and healing to the world’s brokenness and suffering.⁹⁵

In setting forth three paths of reconciliation, it was my hope to include an initiative which involved ecumenical cooperation in inter-faith relations. Because ecumenical and inter-faith dialogues have different aims - the former at best seeking full reconciliation in Christ, the latter aiming for better mutual understanding and possible areas of working together for the common good - Christian churches approach the two forms of dialogue in very different ways. At the Holy See, there are two separate Pontifical Councils, one for Promoting Christian Unity, the other for Inter-Religious Dialogue, with a special Commission for Relations with the Jews. But on the ground, in many local contexts, it is often the same individuals designated by their churches to foster ecumenical and inter-faith relations, and while the distinction between the two should not be blurred, inter-faith relations are clearly an area where Christian churches can and do work together.

There are a number of constructive initiatives underway internationally at present. Over the past decade, the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury has coordinated a series of meetings, entitled ‘Building

⁹⁵ Steven Kepnes, “A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning (draft)”.

Bridges' seminars, bringing together a group of approximately 30 Muslim and Christian scholars for three or four days. Each seminar addresses a particular theme, and includes intensive study of relevant Biblical and Qur'anic texts. The Christian delegation is constituted of Anglicans and of scholars from other churches, for instance including Jesuit Daniel Madigan, cited earlier. A second creative undertaking was recently initiated by a group of 138 Muslim scholars, coming from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. In part brought together in response to Pope Benedict XVI's address in Regensburg in September, 2006, which had produced a dramatic backlash in different parts of the Islamic world, the Muslim scholars drafted a text entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, and in October, 2007, sent it to Pope Benedict, to the Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs, to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to Presidents or Secretaries of other Christian World Communions, initiating a dialogue about the relationship between Islam and Christianity. In November, the Vatican hosted a small group of Muslim signatories of the Common Word in order to further discussions - the most recent in a series of events hosted by Christian churches responding to the creative initiative of the Muslim scholars.

These are excellent and important initiatives, worthy of our attention and support. But the attractiveness of the Scriptural Reasoning initiative was threefold. Firstly, there is the powerful notion that reading and studying the scriptures together should bring new insights into what needs to be repaired in our relations, or healed in our world. It is strengthened by the way in which the initiative is at once faith-based and wanting to draw upon contemporary scholarship; and the way in which its aims are directed both to God and to the suffering of the world.

Secondly, the methodology is impressive. While there are certainly parallels to the methodology of bilateral dialogues and to the ethic of Receptive Ecumenism, the methodology of Scriptural Reasoning also

differs from them in ways that are appropriate for inter-religious rather than ecumenical dialogue: the notion that we come from separate houses, but find a meeting place, a tent of meeting, around the scriptural texts, bringing our core identities into conversation; the way in which such conversation can lead to genuine respect and friendship across religious boundaries; the almost sacramental character of reading together as being done “before the living God, however differently we might identify God”; and the open-ended character of the conversation, not working towards a pre-determined goal, but allowing the wisdom of the scriptures and scriptural reasoning to provide direction.

Thirdly and finally, in light of those strengths, and because it is adaptable and does not require large numbers, Scriptural Reasoning is the sort of initiative which can be replicated in other local contexts. I have been away too long to have much of a sense of the character and quality of inter-faith relations here - though am encouraged that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* emerged from here - but would think that it would be a valuable exercise at least to ponder this model and to be open to learning from it. Wherever Scriptural Reasoning is practised, I think it would be doubly helpful if Christians from different churches were able to work together in this regard, giving witness to our inter-religious partners of our real but imperfect communion, and joining them in giving witness to the world around us of an intelligent and faith-led encounter before God and for the repair of the world.

IV. Deepening Fundamental Human Experience: The Hope Within You

If the first reconciling path proposed in this lecture was that of the astute learner, humbly receptive to the gifts and graces to be found in other churches, and the second reconciling path was that of the prayerful scholar who is also a healer attentive to the world’s suffering, the third path is something of a dreamer, who looks to ponder life’s biggest questions, and looks for company from other Christians on the path.

I mentioned near the start of the lecture the bus advertisements in London that read “*There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*” A month ago, the Russian Orthodox Church purchased an ad with their response: “*There is a God, believe. Don't worry and enjoy your life*”; which I thought was a much better response than another ad citing Ps. 53:1: “*The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.*” The classical New Testament starting point for apologetics, for a rational argumentation for the integrity of Christian faith, comes from 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is within you”. Now in the spirit of Receptive Ecumenism’s invitation to be attentive - both as churches and as individuals - to our sticking points, to areas where we clearly could learn something, here is one that comes to mind immediately for me: our ability to give an articulate intelligent account of our hope, of our Christian life and discipleship. A good starting point would be a deep attentiveness to those mentioned earlier for whom belief is a struggle; attending not only to the arguments, but also and maybe especially to the doubts, including the doubts in our own minds.

In the post-Reformation period, apologetics often spilled over into polemics, as churches spent time and energy defining themselves over and against one another. In the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue, the 2006 Agreed Statement *The Grace Given You in Christ* begins with a reflection on the ways in which Methodists and Roman Catholics viewed each other historically. It was a sobering exercise. In 1760, Bishop Richard Challoner, the leading English Catholic of his day and by almost all other accounts a great and wise figure, published a pamphlet on the Methodists in which he asserted that they “are not the People of God: they are not true Gospel Christians: nor is their new

raised Society the true Church of Christ, or any Part of it.”⁹⁶ John Wesley, for his part, said that he could not see the four marks of the Church - one, holy, catholic and apostolic - in the Church of Rome “in its present form”, and that within it, “neither is ‘the pure Word of God’ preached nor (are) the sacraments ‘duly administered’.”⁹⁷ Today we don’t say those things about each other any more. Indeed at a celebration marking the 300th anniversary of John Wesley’s birth, Cardinal Kasper stated that Catholics are now able to see John and Charles Wesley and the Methodist movement as having been “characterized by a desire to make known the love of Christ, to reform the inner life of the Church, to encourage participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, to foster Christian education, to serve the poor, to impassion professed Christians into articulate witness for Christ’s sake.”⁹⁸

As said above, we have come a great distance in the last 45 years. The question can therefore rightly be asked: now that we have moved away from polemics, now that we acknowledge a considerable deposit of faith which is held in common and can recognize many elements of the Church in each other, what might we be able to do together in addressing the challenges to faith which confront us all equally in the current context? Are there ways in which we can jointly give an account of the hope that is within us? No international ecumenical dialogue is likely to address the subject, because the dialogues are asked to address doctrinal issues which would need to be resolved for us to proceed towards full communion. This isn’t an issue concerning which we are divided, but for the most part it has yet to become an area of witness

⁹⁶ *The Grace Given You in Christ* §23, citing Richard Challoner, *A Caveat against the Methodists, showing how unsafe it is for any Christian to join himself to their society, or to adhere to their teachers* (1760).

⁹⁷ *The Grace Given You in Christ* §24, citing *Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Ed., 21:304f; “Of the Church”, §19, *Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Ed., 3:52.

⁹⁸ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, §41, citing Cardinal Walter Kasper, Homily at Ponte Sant’Angelo Methodist Church, Rome, June 22, 2003.

where we stand together. What is the appropriate ecumenical context to address such questions?

That is the *general* challenge which I would set forward here, and what follows is *one way* of coming at this question - not a way which is particularly well mapped out, perhaps analogous to a doodling on the wall of a cave - but it suggests an approach which has been percolating in my mind as of late.

In an 'Author's Note' at the beginning of his book of poetry entitled *The Geography of Lograire*, American Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes:

This is a purely tentative first draft of a longer work in progress, in which there are, necessarily, many gaps. This is only a beginning of patterns, the first opening up of the dream. A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more and more he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It cannot be purely private, any more than it can be purely public. It cannot be fully communicated. It grows out of a common participation which is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images.⁹⁹

This is a helpful starting point in more than one respect. Merton indicates that the draft he is putting forward, the pattern he is trying to map out, is one that he will spend his lifetime working on. The ideas being tentatively mapped out in this section fall loosely into that category as well. And what is it that Merton - as poet and no doubt also

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 457.

as monk and theologian - trying to map out? It is the world in which he lives, and in which he searches for meaning. For him, it is a world inhabited by God, but where God is often experienced as hidden. And within that world, it is fundamental human experience that he is trying to ponder, to map out. He draws out something of the paradox of human experience here - it is not purely private, nor purely public; it grows out of a common participation but can only be set down in personal images. Words and charts remain inadequate for the task - it cannot be fully communicated.

Merton's reflections resonate with those of the splendid Annie Dillard, who similarly sets out to look closely at human experience, at the natural world, at the place of God in it, and to ask, in her words, "one of the few questions worth asking, to wit, What in the Sam Hill is going on here?"¹⁰⁰ In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, quoting at the outset from the Book of Job, she writes:

In making the thick darkness a swaddling band for the sea, God 'set bars and doors' and said, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.' But have we come even that far? Have we rowed out to the thick darkness, or are we all playing pinochle in the bottom of the boat?... Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.... We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.¹⁰¹

In her text *Living by Fiction*, she probes the way in which contemporary fiction explores "the breadth of human experience in time and place".¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. *

¹⁰¹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), pp. 7, 9.

¹⁰² Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 12.

Like Merton, Dillard is intentional in her attempt to give some account of human experience and the place of God within it.

At an informal talk delivered in Calcutta just a few weeks before his sudden death in December, 1968, Merton spoke of the monk and the poet as among those who withdraw to the margin of society precisely “with a view to deepening fundamental human experience”.¹⁰³ He proceeded to say a little more of what it means to deepen fundamental human experience, in terms related to death and to doubt. The monk “struggles with the fact of death in himself, trying to seek something deeper than death; because there is something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person, the meditative person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life.” Likewise, “the monk is one who has to struggle in the depths of his being with the presence of doubt”, even what some religions call ‘the great doubt’, in order to come to a deep awareness of the presence of God.¹⁰⁴

By now you should have caught the phrase which is part of the lecture’s title. My imagination has long been captured by Merton’s notion that deepening fundamental human experience - and I take that to mean both a more attentive participation in human experience and deepening reflection on it - is a door through which doubt can be addressed, a door that opens up onto a profound sense of God’s presence. Merton’s reflections lead to the central question being explored here, namely, whether there is a way in which a deepening reflection on fundamental human experience could contribute to a more vibrant account of Christian hope that could speak to the minds and hearts of people of the present day.

¹⁰³ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. N. Burton, P. Hart and J. Laughlin) (London: Sheldon Press, 1973), p. 305.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

For many today, human experience is the decisive criterion by which the integrity of faith claims stand or fall. This is not to suggest that faith can be proved, that it isn't dependent on divine revelation, on grace; but rather, it is to acknowledge that one key factor which opens us to that revelation is its resonance with what we know of the world, of human life and history, of the mystery of the human person. We want our decisions, especially ultimately important decisions, to be informed by our experience; and a revelation of God which does not reach that experience is not likely to fully convince us, nor to lead us to a full giving of ourselves - as individuals and communities - in a response of faith. Of course Christianity is by definition incarnational, a plunging of divinity into the human condition in order to redeem it. We recognize God the creator as in some way being the author of human experience, and the Holy Spirit as sustaining us in the midst of human life. So this should be friendly terrain for Christian theology.

Nonetheless, looking to human experience for traces of God's presence - as an ecumenical venture - raises big methodological questions. Human experience as something to be investigated has almost no parameters. Furthermore, to speak of *fundamental* human experience is itself needing to be qualified in various ways; what does it include, and to what extent can any experience be said to be *common*? How could one give this sort of investigation some parameters, to make it credible, accountable, responsible? Then there are specifically theological questions. To what extent, or in what way, can we say that the God, whose face is revealed to us in the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is also revealed to us in the very structures and depths of what it is to be human? And how do we begin to reflect on such connections, not simply in an abstract theological way, but in an existential way? Stated differently, in what way can a deepening of fundamental human experience also deepen our understanding of God's self-gift to us in Christ and in the Holy Spirit? If it is by pondering

questions such as these that a path might lead towards an engaging account of our Christian hope, then it is a very long path indeed.

In the remainder of this section, I would like simply to point to three signposts, three aspects of such an investigation, raising pertinent questions as we move along. The first signpost would be simply to draw on some of the methodological principles and insights that have been identified in the previous sections of this paper. Might it be possible for a group of Christians from different Christian communities who are interested in exploring this question to come together in something of the same way that a dialogue commission comes together? And just as a theme is chosen in advance for sessions of Scriptural Reasoning, might it be helpful to choose a particular aspect of human experience - birth, the creative process, joy, fear, suffering - to focus the investigation, to break down the impossibly large category of fundamental human experience? Could such a theme be at the centre of reading, reflection and discussion for a given year, always with an eye to seeing how God is present in that aspect of human experience, with an eye to the goal of being able to offer a more incarnational account of the hope that is within us?

The second set of signposts has to do with bringing our internal libraries to the task at hand, notably the Scriptures and tradition. Would it be possible to come together around the Scriptures in reflecting on a particular aspect of human experience? In doing so, here too it would be useful to draw in contemporary biblical scholarship. Regarding the tradition, of course there is a lengthy discourse about the experience of God that runs through Christian history. This is a significant part of the internal library which would need to be drawn upon intensively. St. Augustine, the ‘master of interiority’, decisively shaped the Western tradition through his account of spiritual experience, and his understanding of the interplay between the immanence and transcendence of God - who “is more intimately present to me than my

inmost being and higher than the highest element in me”¹⁰⁵. His understanding of the Fall and of the fallen nature of human existence has also marked the Western tradition, both raising cautions and questions which would need to be addressed. St. Thomas Aquinas helped to situate human experience theologically, speaking of the three ‘books’ through which God is revealed: creation, the Scriptures and human experience. For Thomas, each of the three need to be held together and seen in relation to each other.¹⁰⁶ How do the Reformers, attentive to recovering the central place of the Scriptures in Christian life, engage human experience as a theological category?

Another element of our internal libraries is the voice of contemplatives, mystics, and saints, of those whose experience of God has left a profound imprint on the tradition. From there comes the hint of a suggestion that beneath the joys and griefs, complexity and absurdities of human experience is the presence of God. Catherine Doherty, the foundress of the Madonna House Apostolate, writes: “One day, one moment, I hope soon, but it’s up to God, I shall wake up, and I shall realize that I lived in a splendor the like of which I never understood. And I shall understand that which my heart yearned for all my life. I shall understand love.”¹⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, at the end of his journal *The Sign of Jonas*, has the voice of God speaking from paradise: “What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.”¹⁰⁸ No word do we want to hear more, but what is the evidence for this word, how do we come to hear it for ourselves?

¹⁰⁵ *Confessions*, Book III, §6.

¹⁰⁶ *Expérience de Dieu avec Thomas d’Aquin* (Introduction et textes choisis par Benoît Garceau; Fides, 2001), pp. 13-14.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Catherine Doherty, in the film made for television, *World Religions: The Lady They Called the B*, produced and directed by Mike McManus, TV Ontario, 1973.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1956), pp. 351-52.

How do we reckon with this voice theologically? Can we trust this voice, does it take adequate account of evil, of the vast sea of human suffering? Can we afford to ignore it?

Finally, such a study of human experience would do well to turn to other disciplines in order to read and draw in insights on whatever aspect of human experience was being investigated. In his text *Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit*, Karl Rahner has Ignatius tell his Society to “study Marx, Freud and Einstein, try to evolve a theology which can touch the ear and heart” of people today.¹⁰⁹ Novels and biographies, the social and human sciences, the natural sciences, would all be pertinent to this investigation, along with the life experience of the individual participants.

This may all seem too vast, yet just as artists and poets set out to interpret the world, so too must theologians. In recent decades theology has increasingly tended to thrive in more precise disciplines, wherein methodologies are refined and clear parameters of investigation are set.¹¹⁰ Ecumenical theology, at least as undertaken in dialogue commissions, is also very focused, as agreed statements are worked out carefully sentence by sentence on the precise doctrinal questions which separate us. But there is also a need within theology as a whole, and within ecumenical theology in particular, to seek to paint the broad canvas, where the goal is not to work out an agreement, but to address large questions pertaining to God, human life, faith, and the hope that is within us.

¹⁰⁹ Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit”, in Karl Rahner and Paul Imhof, *Ignatius of Loyola* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 32.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), p. 7, where Rahner writes: “Theology has in fact become fragmented into an immense number of individual disciplines, with each individual discipline offering an enormous amount of material, employing its own very differentiated and difficult methodology, and having very little contact with other related or neighboring theological disciplines”.

ARCIC writes of the Church's responsibility to "make the relevance of the Gospel plain to every generation" by *prophetically translating* it in each new context.¹¹¹ The Commission itself sought to do this, pursuing together a restatement of doctrine which involved recovering the language of Scripture and common traditions, but also refining a new language to speak the Churches' common faith.¹¹² Analogously, perhaps a sustained ecumenical reflection on fundamental human experience could help not only retrieve past ways of speaking of God in human experience, but also give us new language to do so, language which might open reservoirs of Christian hope in our context, and thereby address doubt and obstacles to faith. But in expressing that possibility, it is helpful to turn to a sublime passage from "East Coker", the second of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, to put the task into perspective:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years -
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* -
Trying to use words, and every attempt
is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

¹¹¹ *Authority I*, n.15, in *The Final Report*, p.59.

¹¹² Cf. *The Final Report*, Preface, p. 2.

And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.¹¹³

Just as Receptive Ecumenism and Scriptural Reasoning are initiatives which invite and require humility, so too does this proposal. Merton introduced his collection of poetry by speaking of it as “a purely tentative first draft of a longer work in progress, in which there are, necessarily, many gaps.” And Eliot speaks of trying “to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again”. But his conclusion is equally important: “For us, there is only the trying.” The proposal sketched here has humble aims - it is not seeking to work out a new overarching synthesis regarding human experience and the search for God. It is only aiming to harness some of gains in ecumenical relations and insights from ecumenical methodology, in suggesting that it might be fruitful for Christians to find avenues to come together around the connection between fundamental human experience and the task of giving an account of the hope that is within us.

Conclusion:

No doubt you will have heard discussions about whether or not we find ourselves in the midst of an ecumenical Winter. A year and a half ago I had the opportunity to address the Australian Council of Churches, which was meeting in Brisbane, on the Queensland coast, in July (their version of Winter). Indeed they were having what they called a ‘cold spell’, as it didn’t rise above 20 C. on the opening day of the conference, and more than one person apologized for the bad weather. When after my address I was asked the inevitable question as to whether we were in

¹¹³ T. S. Eliot, *East Coker V*.

the midst of an ecumenical Winter, I explained something of a Saskatchewan Winter to them, tried to communicate something of the reality of -40 C., then proceeded to say that we might be in the midst of an *ecumenical Queensland Winter*, but not a Saskatchewan one.

Cardinal Kasper has often said that we find ourselves in an interim period ecumenically. While there is a gradual growth towards unity in untold ways, there are also theological questions which we cannot yet see our way around. It is a fitting place to be in the season of Lent. In a recent column of Ron Rolheiser's I was reminded that 'Lent' is derived from an old English word for 'Spring'; but in Latin, 'lente' means 'slowly'. Good metaphors for both Saskatchewan weather and the search for Christian unity. The Canadian theologian Janet Soskice, who teaches at Cambridge, speaks of the steady *drip, drip, drip* - the slow steady flow of ecumenism. But an interim period is rich with possibilities, and the initiatives presented here are efforts to fill that space of possibility with creativity: attempting to identify ecumenical and inter-faith paths which are at once faithful to the present parameters of ecumenical engagement and attempting to map out new territory; attempting to find paths of reconciliation that reach the Church, the academy and the world. There is ample space for further creative reflection and other initiatives in this interim period. It is for us to ask what steps are possible at present, confident that the Holy Spirit will open new doors when we take the steps within reach at any given moment. It is an ecumenical rendering of John Henry Newman's *Lead, Kindly Light*: "Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene – one step enough for me."